

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

OF

GOVERNOR DIRK KEMPTHORNE

STATE OF IDAHO

House Committee on Government Reform
Thursday, October 20th, 10:00 am

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I am pleased to be here today to discuss the very important and timely issue of the role of the National Guard in Homeland Security preparedness and disaster relief.

As we meet here today, the Idaho National Guard's 116th Brigade Combat Team is deployed in Iraq, our 183rd Attack Helicopter Battalion is being deployed to Afghanistan and our 189th Airlift Squadron continues to rotate its C-130 aircraft and crews in and out of Southeast Asia.

There are also 400 Idaho National Guardsmen deployed in Louisiana to assist with Hurricane Response efforts along the Gulf Coast. I'm proud that today, in all, Idaho has a higher percentage of our Guard forces mobilized than any other state.

I am also proud of the fact that the Idaho National Guard has accepted every mission that has ever been requested of it, without exception or reservation. And I am proud of the men and women who carry out those missions with great professionalism and honor.

They represent Idaho and they represent the United States of America extremely well.

So, I come here today with firsthand knowledge of the impact these missions have on a state's ability to respond to a terrorist event or a natural disaster.

In anticipation of your first question: "what can the federal government do to help states prepare," my first response is to ensure that we have equipment. Now why would I say that when we have an entire National Guard?

Because over the next several weeks, the 116th Brigade Combat Team will demobilize from Iraq, and significantly, they will leave behind their vehicles and rolling stock that would fill a train with 212 railroad cars.

This includes 60 Humvees, 213 mid-sized and heavy trucks, 37 trailers, 96 tracked vehicles and 6 recovery vehicles.

At this time, I have not been made aware of any plan to reequip the 116th with the basic equipment that will be left in Iraq.

Couple this with the BRAC Recommendation to remove the C-130 heavy cargo aircraft from the Idaho Air National Guard – a move that will not only leave Idaho, but the entire Pacific Northwest without airlift capabilities – and you can begin to understand the magnitude of the gap left in our strategic response capabilities.

These facts are in direct conflict with my ability as a Governor to prepare for disaster and/or domestic terrorist attacks. We need a commitment from the federal government that the equipment that is left in Iraq will be replaced in quick order.

And we need further assessment of the BRAC recommendations on our ability to respond immediately to a regional disaster.

When assets such as a C-130 are under the control of a Governor, that Governor can make one call and within an hour props are turning.

This is not always the case with federal assets. A comparison of total flights flown by Air National Guard units versus Air Force Reserve units over a four-day period, in response to Hurricane Katrina, shows that the Guard flew ten missions to every one mission flown by their Reserve counterparts.

A case in point: I spoke to a Governor of a southern state who said there were sixty C-130s under federal jurisdiction and, much to the frustration and disappointment of the Air Force Reserve flight crews, few if any of them were flying.

When brigades return from a one-year tour of duty in the Middle East, they are at a truly proficient level of training. How do we maintain that level of readiness upon their return if they now encounter a critical equipment shortage? And what does this imply for Homeland Security?

What is the effect of this on retention and recruitment inside our National Guard units, immediately following a deployment to Iraq?

We have spent millions of dollars preparing and equipping our men and women for battle, but after they return from war, our ability to train and maintain readiness is significantly lessened by lack of a basic equipment complement.

If we are to retain these highly skilled soldiers, and if we are to attract the next generation of men and women to the National Guard, then we must have equipment to train with...it is just that simple.

In addition to the obvious issues surrounding equipment, I think it is also very important that we remain vigilant with respect to qualified personnel.

In the case of natural disaster or terrorist attack, as the immediate response begins to transition into widespread search & rescue operation, we need to be prepared to backfill emergency personnel with relief teams from the National Guard, federal government, or other states.

Idaho's initial responders can sustain an adequate emergency response for a 24 to 48 hour period...at that point we will need to move more personnel quickly to the disaster scene.

Additionally, as we begin to activate national guardsmen, we deplete the bank of emergency responders, such as doctors, nurses, EMT's and law enforcement officers, because, in many cases, these men and women are part of the National Guard.

As this backfilling process takes place, the federal government should become a facilitator of state-to-state aid, not a roadblock.

Moreover, when this immediate need occurs and there is a specific request from a Governor through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact or EMAC process, all equipment and personnel necessary should be provided as a coordinated, significant force instead of doing it piecemeal, over the course of time.

I commend General Steven Blum and his team from the National Guard Bureau for their efforts to coordinate state-to-state, Governor-to-Governor support during the Gulf Coast Hurricanes. The General's efforts truly showcased how this model can work properly.

Where it does not always work so well, is in the coordination between the state and federal governments. Let me give you an example from Hurricane Katrina.

In the days after the Hurricane devastated the Gulf Coast region, Idaho responded to an urgent request to evacuate the frail elderly from Gulf Coast states. We had identified more than 400 nursing home beds in Idaho for these evacuees and sent two C-130s with critical care nurses and emergency room physicians to Houston and to Meridian, Mississippi.

When our planes touched down, our people were met with significant resistance. In one case, despite the overwhelming need for evacuation for many of the frail elderly, we could not find anyone who would release patients to us. It was only after the Governor interceded with the person in charge of the Astrodome that we were able to get 10 individuals out.

In the other case, the temporary hospital that had been set up to receive frail elderly was on a federal installation. When our people arrived, they were warmly greeted by overworked and stressed Mississippi medical personnel. But they were told by a federal official that they could not help because they had not been “federalized”.

As patients were coming into the hospital, two emergency room physicians and eight critical care nurses from Idaho literally stood against the wall because they did not have the necessary federal credentials to treat patients.

It is worth noting that, had the hospital been anywhere else besides federal property, there would have been no problem with our doctors and nurses seeing patients.

From my perspective, this is a fundamental breakdown in state-to-state assistance that is caused by inflexible federal regulations.

Since when did it become illegal for one state to help another state in these United States? This is the United States of America, not the Federal Government of America.

I would encourage this committee to look at this issue as you consider reforms to federal emergency response policy.

Mr. Chairman, in closing, we need to ensure the men and women of our National Guard are celebrated for their contributions to our safety and security.

They are a significant part of our first line of defense from enemies both foreign and domestic and make up a growing percentage of our active troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. In time of disaster within our country, they are the most effective way of carrying out the great American tradition of neighbor helping neighbor.

We need to ensure that they are provided with the best equipment, the best health care and the best opportunities for training and development available. This ensures their benefits are commensurate with their service.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today. I am passionate about the support we provide for our men and women in uniform and I commend you for your interest in these matters and for holding these hearings. I look forward to this discussion.